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TELEGRAM

September 30, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 4402 - PRIORITY)
TAGS: EFIN, OVIP, PREL, PGOV
Captions: None
Subject: SCENESETTER FOR THE FIRST ECONOMIC BUSINESSWOMEN'S
FORUM IN ABU DHABI
Ref: None

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 04402

SIPDIS
CXABU:
ACTION: ECON
INFO: P/M AMB DCM POL
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INFO: FCS

DISSEMINATION: ECON
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB: MWAHBA
DRAFTED: ECON: CCRUMPLER
CLEARED: ECON: OJOHN; PAO: TPONCE

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1883
INFO RUEHZM/GCC COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 004402

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DAS CHENEY AND G/IWI PONTICELLI FROM AMBASSADOR
WAHBA

DEPT ALSO FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/08
TAGS: [EFIN](#) [KWMN](#) [OVIP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TC](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE FIRST ECONOMIC BUSINESSWOMEN'S
FORUM IN ABU DHABI

[11](#). (U) Classified by Ambassador Marcelle M. Wahba for
reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[12](#). (U) DAS Cheney and Senior Coordinator Ponticelli: I
would like to welcome you to the UAE to attend the First
Economic Businesswomen's Forum in Abu Dhabi, October 7-10.
The UAEG has invested a tremendous amount of time and
capital into this event, which is sponsored by UAE First
Lady Shaykha Fatima bint Mubarak. A review of the
conference agenda confirms that the event organizers -- the

Arab League's Council for Arab Businesswomen, the UAE General Women's Union, and the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry -- have pulled together an impressive list of businesswomen from all over the region (including Her Highness Shaykha Hessa Saad Al-Sabah from Kuwait, Princess Basma bint Talal from Jordan, and Princess Reem Bint Al Waleed bin Talal from KSA) to address the more than 400 expected participants. This scenesetter also serves as a primary on the status of women in the UAE. Please see speech building blocks in paragraph 15.

Shaykha Fatima: An Advocate For UAE Women

13. (C) Shaykha Fatima, with the possible exception of UAE President Shaykh Zayid, is the strongest proponent in the UAE for women's rights and increasing opportunities for women in the workforce. Fatima, who is in her late fifties, is a key player in UAE politics and a key advisor to her octogenarian husband on any number of domestic and regional issues. She is the mother of important U.S. interlocutors Armed Forces Chief of Staff Muhammad, de facto Foreign Minister Hamdan, State Security Director Hazza, and Information Minister Abdullah, and has played a dynamic, behind-the-scenes role in formulating the UAE's pro-American policy post-9/11. In past meetings, Fatima has articulated the UAE's policy with regard to the war on terrorism and expressed concern about regional stability, in particular tension within the Saudi ruling family.

14. (C) Fatima is a moderate voice for change in the UAE and follows Shaykh Zayid's efforts to combat the more conservative elements of UAE society. Fatima is aware that secular education is the only way to ensure that Emirati students are not being indoctrinated by over-zealous (mostly Egyptian and Jordanian) teachers, and has been the guiding force in what is shaping up to be a complete reassessment of the primary and secondary education system in the UAE.

15. (U) Fatima has also been a strong advocate for the rights of Emirati women in the workplace and educational realm, demanding that UAE universities practice a gender-blind policy of admission. As a result, 70 percent of UAE university students are now women. She also is pushing for inclusion of women in the UAE's all-male, all-appointed parliament. In her capacity as Chairperson of the UAE General Women's Union, Fatima in early 2002 hosted the First Arab League Women's conference in the UAE. The conference focused on women in the media and was the first in a series of Arab League conferences dealing with Arab women's issues. The spouses of six Arab Heads of State, including Egyptian First Lady Suzanne Mubarak who gave the keynote address, attended this first conference. Also in attendance were female journalists from throughout the Arab world, Europe and the United States. We expect this year's Businesswomen's Forum to meet similar success.

Local Women's Groups Take The Lead

16. (U) Under the visionary leadership and encouragement of Shaykha Fatima, the General Women's Union (GWU) since 1975 has acted as an umbrella organization for UAE's many women's societies and associations. The quasi-governmental GWU is responsible for suggesting new laws as well as amendments to existing regulations on matters relevant to women, children, and the disabled in the UAE. The GWU offers vocational training, and routinely conducts educational programs on a wide-range of subjects -- including dressmaking and handicrafts, home economics, computers and foreign languages. The organization also offers job placement services, family mediation services, and religious education to women. As evidenced by the broad participation of women expected at the October conference, the GWU has strong Arab and international links

with women's organizations around the world.

¶17. (U) A co-sponsor of the conference, the UAE Businesswomen's Committee was established in 2001 by the Abu Dhabi Chambers of Commerce and Industry to support working women in the UAE and give them opportunities to network with other female professionals throughout the Arab World. The UAE Businesswomen's Committee was recognized by the Arab League in 2002 and has since sponsored a number of local networking events. The UAE Businesswomen's Committee has focused on establishing training programs for women on creating a business plan, using computers, and managing business accounts. In 2002, the Businesswomen's Committee counted 1,142 businesswomen on its membership roster, representing construction, tailoring, trade, contracting, and many other industries.

UAE Women Have Made Great Strides...

¶18. (U) Since the founding of the federation more than 30 years ago, UAE women have made tremendous progress in finding opportunities outside of the home and now are an integral part of the country's workforce. In previous meetings with various U.S. officials, UAE businesswomen have stressed that they face very different challenges than their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf -- especially women in Saudi Arabia. Most UAE university graduates are female -- quality and availability of education is not a problem. Furthermore, women are guaranteed equal rights and opportunities under the law, and UAE families nowadays are used to women working outside of the home.

¶19. (U) Recent data supports the assertion that more female students are enrolled in the UAE's higher education programs than male students. During the 2002-2003 school year, the UAE University in Al Ain admitted a total of 3,973 students, of which 2,742 were female. Women comprised 3,768 of the total 6,501 new student admissions at the UAE's Higher Colleges of Technology. Zayed University for Women registered 635 new students to its two campuses -- an increase of 12 percent over the previous year. In 1972, there were only 54 adult education centers in the UAE and the majority of educators were men. In 2001, the number of adult education centers had doubled to 118, and 59 percent of teachers and administrative staff were females.

¶10. (U) Women are now an important part of the UAE workforce, and make-up 41 percent of education professionals, 34 percent of health care professionals, and 20 percent of social workers in the UAE. UAE female employees can be found in 24 federal ministries, and account for 28 percent of all government workers. UAE women working in the banking and financial services sector constitute 39 percent of all women working in that field. Seventy percent of women working in banks also are college graduates or possess advanced degrees.

...But Still Face Unique Challenges

¶11. (U) UAE businesswomen have told us, however, that a major challenge facing UAE women is a lack of self-confidence and role models for young entrepreneurs. For that reason, the UAE Businesswomen's Committee has focused its efforts on training programs designed to equip national women with the skills they need to start and manage their own businesses. The programs target young ladies at the Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University, as well as businesswomen working out of their homes.

¶12. (U) UAE businesswomen also have problems obtaining access to capital. Although the generally wealthy and well-connected women of Abu Dhabi have few problems financing new businesses, very real social/cultural

restrictions and non-availability of start-up capital -- particularly for those without collateral, and especially in the poorer northern emirates -- remain significant challenges many Emirati women have yet to overcome.

¶13. (C) During a February visit to the UAE of NEA/RA Director Gary Grappo, members of the Executive Council of the National Businesswomen's Committee admitted that specific training under MEPI for businesswomen (writing a business plan, managing business accounts, etc.) would be helpful. The Executive Board also requested a list of top businesswomen in America, from which the Committee could extend invitations to various conferences and explore the possibility of a U.S.-UAE businesswomen mentoring program, also within the framework of MEPI.

¶14. (U) Our Mission has encouraged the MEPI office to develop long-term goals and specific programs building on the progress already underway in the UAE with the formation of businesswomen's associations and existing UAEG programs to support women's entry into the private sector. MEPI funds also could be used to support practical skills training in setting up and running a business for aspiring businesswomen, and bringing more American women speakers to the region to address relevant issues.

Suggested Talking Points

¶15. (U) You are scheduled to give a brief, 5-minute address during the opening session of the conference on October 7, and may want to include the following themes that both recognize the remarkable achievements made by UAE women and reaffirm the USG's commitment to help further open doors for local women:

-- UAE women have made tremendous strides during the last 30 years, and now are an integral part of the country's workforce.

-- Many of the positive changes -- improved health care for women and children, increased private sector employment for aspiring businesswomen, and quality and availability of education for girls -- can be directly attributed to the vision and leadership of Her Highness Shaykha Fatima bint Mubarak and His Highness President Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan.

-- I also applaud the efforts of the General Women's Union and the UAE Businesswomen's Committee to help prepare women for work outside of the home, encourage women to start their own businesses, and help professional women maintain the delicate balance between work and family -- a struggle that all of us face.

-- The Middle East Partnership Initiative also seeks to foster entrepreneurship and opportunities in the private sector for UAE nationals, especially women.

-- We would like to be your partners in supporting existing and future programs to train national women for private sector employment, and businesswomen's associations and programs that provide practical skills training.

-- We would also like to explore further the possibility of establishing an Arab Businesswomen or U.S.-UAE Businesswomen Network or mentoring program that would bring together female entrepreneurs from our two countries.

Wahba